

Jejak Tabi 2021: Reflections on “Getting to Know Okinawa Through Dancing”

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The “Getting to Know Okinawa Through Dancing” lecture and workshop was instructive for the history shared, the social contours revealed and the cultural similarities that came to the fore, especially to a Malaysian audience. It drove home the fact that the performing arts is an in-situ repository of culture that is particular to its place of origin, but also provides commentary on the connections to adjacent cultures.

The history of the Ryukyu Kingdom, where the performing arts were embedded in the royal house as forms of “soft power” vis-à-vis bilateral relations with China especially, helped explain the dance movements. The small sideways steps, gentle movements and tendency to dance in a row facing the audience can be understood as elements of reverence to royalty and dignitaries, where restrained movement denotes social obeisance. This is reminiscent of traditional Malay dance such as Tarian Inang, which also has provenance in court entertainment and thus displays such “*lemah gemalai*” (liltingly soft) movements.

In contrast, the Okinawa plays which were performed for and by the general populace feature bigger, more exaggerated steps. Presumably, the dialogue would also differ from the court entertainment forms, in a distinction that mirrors the mass entertainment—fine art dichotomy that lingers into the present.

A follow-on area of inquiry would be to understand the gender-based social organisation of the Ryukyu Kingdom, manifested through the choice to have only men perform all roles across genders. Perhaps women were more home-bound, and prohibited from performing to strangers in public. Or maybe the performers had to be the same gender as the head of state in the audience, which is the reason why traditional Mak Yong theatre performers in the Pattani¹ region were women, as the reigning royalty were women.

The performance costumes provided insight to a few intricacies of Japanese society. This was especially helpful for an international crowd. For example, Michihiko Kakazu-san’s explanation of the different ways of fastening kimonos—where in Okinawa, the usual obi is replaced with a sash—imparted a visual code that helped outsiders understand the diversity within Japanese society, which is often understood as a monocultural unit. These snippets of information were effective in presenting a more nuanced view of Japan, and an appreciation for its history.

Speaking on the topic of adjacent cultures, the story of Kumiodori performance delivered an almost *deja-vu* sensation that recalled Mak Yong. The first similarity is the *sanshin*, a string instrument that reminds one of the *rebab*, the traditional Malay string instrument that is the musical heart of Mak Yong, revered such that Mak Yong performances open with the performers conducting the “*menghadap rebab*” (“paying homage to the rebab”) ceremony. The fact that the snake skin used to make the

¹ A Muslim-Malay majority area in present-day southern Thailand.

sanshin was historically imported from Indonesia added another facet when considering the longstanding linkages between East Asia and Southeast Asia. Occasionally, there was a singer providing guttural musical accompaniment, another feature similar to Mak Yong.

The theme of exchange and connection continued during the workshop. The attendees, comprising dancers from Malaysian higher education institutions, were eager to learn the dance movements, with requests for more instruction on the more complex feet movements. They asked about the differences between Ryukyu traditional dance and Noh or Kabuki, apart from questions on the Okinawa cultural aspects that inform the performances.

For such brief and compressed sessions, the lecture and workshop showed that the performing arts is a form of living history that is ready to impart rich lessons on commonalities and distinctions, to all who are prepared to listen.